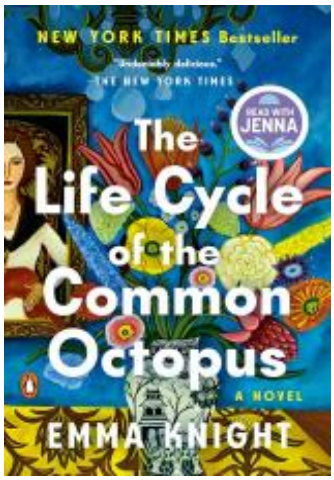
The Life Cycle of the Common Octopus

by Emma Knight



About the Book

A witty, atmospheric and brilliantly told novel that offers compelling portraits of womanhood, motherhood and female friendship, along with the irresistible intrigue surrounding an extraordinary British family.

Arriving at the University of Edinburgh for her first term, Pen knows that her divorced parents back in Canada are hiding something from her. She believes she?ll find the answer here in Scotland, where an old friend of her father?s --- now a famous writer known as Lord Lennox --- lives. When she is invited to spend the weekend at Lord Lennox?s centuries-old estate with his enveloping, fascinating family, Pen begins to unravel her parents? secret, just as she?s falling in love for the first time.

As Pen experiences the sharp shock of adulthood, she comes to rely on herself for the first time in her life. A rich and rewarding novel of campus life, of sexual awakening, and ultimately, of the many ways women can become mothers in this world, THE LIFE CYCLE OF THE COMMON OCTOPUS asks to what extent we need to look back in order to move forward.

Discussion Guide

1. Pen is obsessed with learning the truth about her family and their secrets yet is trained to be polite. How does she begin to resolve these conflicting drives?

2. At university, Alice wants to ?save [Pen] from herself? by encouraging her friend to be bold and carefree, now that Pen is away from the influence of her parents --- and it?s true that Pen becomes more relaxed throughout the course of the novel. Is it Alice who helps her along the way, or do other characters contribute? What do you see as key moments in Pen?s growth?

3. This is a book about friendship, motherhood, first love, familial bonds, generational progress and self-reliance. Which, in your view, is the central relationship of this story?

4. Carl Jung has said that nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on a child than the ?unlived lives? of the parents. Do you agree? How do the unachieved ambitions and frustrated hopes of the parent characters in this story affect their children, and how (if at all) do the children get out from under these influences to live their own lives?

5. Anna is disappointed to receive expensive earrings from Ted as a Christmas present, because she intuits that the gift suggests he has stopped seeing her for who she is (someone who doesn?t wear showy jewelry), and has instead begun to see her impersonally, as a ?wife.? Do you think she was correct? What kind of gift do you think she would have preferred?

6. What does Pen gain from her time running errands with Christina?

7. When Jo was forced to move schools after her affair with Sylvia Clarke, her parents try to keep her in the closet. It?s Fergus, though, whose support ?had made it possible for her to refuse to lie about who she was.? Do you have someone in your life who helps you be the most authentic version of yourself, even --- or especially --- when authenticity is difficult?

8. Even though Pen knows what?s going on between Alice and Julian, she chooses to stay out of it and advises Jo to do the same. What do you think of Pen?s choice not to talk to her friend about the affair? What would you have done in that situation?

9. Have you ever been curious about an unexplained part of your family history? Did you pursue answers, or let sleeping dogs lie?

10. If you had to sit next to any of the characters in THE LIFE CYCLE OF THE COMMON OCTOPUS on a crowded train (the quiet car is full, I?m afraid), who would you choose and what would you talk about?

11. The inspiration for the novel?s title is only revealed near the end. What did you think as that piece fell into place? Did your understanding of the book shift?

Author Bio

Emma Knight's debut novel, THE LIFE CYCLE OF THE COMMON OCTOPUS, is a "Read with Jenna" pick, a Giller Prize finalist, a *New York Times* bestseller and an instant #1 Canadian bestseller. She is a co-founder of Greenhouse, an award-winning Canadian beverage company, and has co-authored two nationally bestselling cookbooks: THE GREENHOUSE COOKBOOK (2017) and HOW TO EAT WITH ONE HAND (2021). Her essays have appeared in a number of Canadian and international publications. Emma lives in Toronto with her husband and two daughters.

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